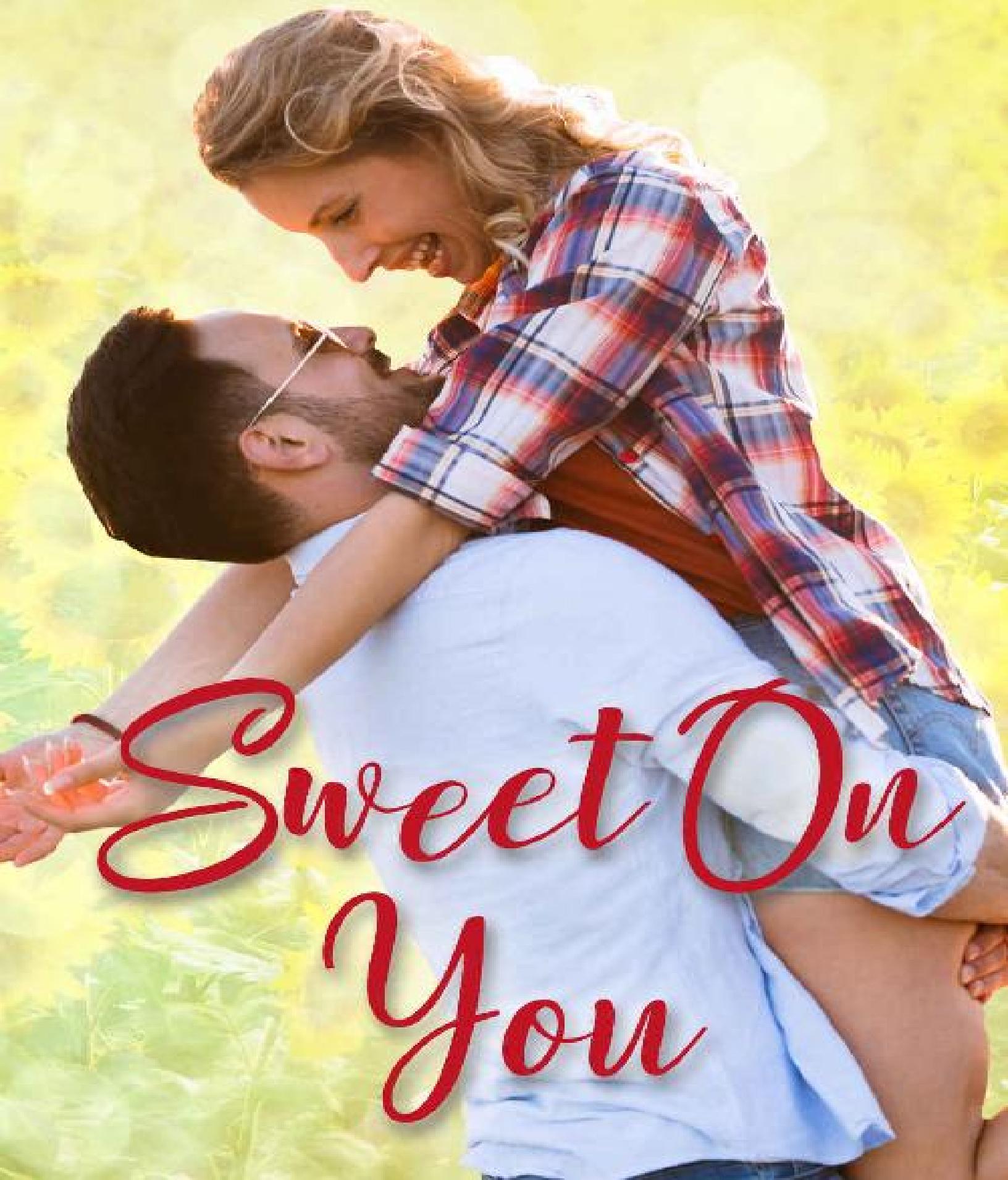


MIA BRODY



*Sweet On  
You*

# Sweet on You: A Friends to Lovers Curvy Woman Romance

Mia Brody

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# Dedication

*For the runaways, home is waiting for you.*

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# Chapter One

## *June*

I pull my motorcycle to a stop as I recognize the broken-down truck in front of the “Welcome to Sweetgrass River” sign.

There’s only one person that beat-to-hell black Ford belongs to. Joshua Rawlins, my high school crush. Not that he ever gave little June Abbott anything but the “we’re good friends” speech.

Yanking off my helmet, my blonde hair spills free and without my visor, I can see him clearly. And damn, time has been good to the oldest Rawlins brother.

My breath catches in my throat as I stare into the cornflower blue gaze that’s haunted my dreams since I was sixteen.

I swing from the bike, feeling the breeze up my miniskirt too late.

Josh’s gaze drops and he swallows, looking like he’s not thinking of me as the good little girl he used to watch over. Guess I don’t look quite the same anymore since I went away.

“Are you alright there, stranger?” I ask despite knowing his identity. Sweetgrass River has a population of approximately three hundred and twenty-four souls, give or take the squirrel that narrowly missed my bike on this country road.

“Sunflower,” he says the nickname so softly it feels like a caress.

He gave it to me after I gifted him a paper sunflower following the death of his mama when he was sixteen. It’d been a friendship gesture from an eleven-year-old girl, and it earned me Josh’s constant watchful eye. Probably a blessing since twice I should have died, and he’d stepped in. Always

my protector. But never anything more thanks to that five-year age gap.

I nod to the truck because I don't want to get lost in memories of times past. "You were supposed to sell this thing years ago."

He taught me how to drive in it. I still remember him leaning in close during one lesson. So close that my sixteen-year-old heart had been certain he was trying to kiss me. Of course, he wasn't, and I only embarrassed myself over it.

"Some things are worth holdin' onto," Josh says, enjoying a leisurely inspection of my body. His gaze travels over my cowboy boots with purple butterflies on them and suddenly, I'm wondering what it would be like to stand before him in nothing but them.

I cross my arms over my chest, purposely dragging my red tank top lower, so he can see more cleavage. For a second, I'm back there in the truck when I kissed Josh. It was a humid summer day, just like this one.

"It seems like you have a problem," I say, thinking about the humiliation I felt when he'd pushed me away.

"Are you interested in being a good Samaritan?" He asks but something about the way he says it makes me think less of a neighbor and more of the big, bad wolf.

I tip my head and study him like I forgot him. "You're one of them Rawlins boys, aren't ya?"

He was my best friend. He took my hand in his when I buried my parents at fifteen. He let me cry on his shoulder and told me the pain would never leave but it would lessen one day. That I'd be able to think of them and smile.

"You look familiar. Like a good girl I once knew," he answers my taunt.

I give him a grin that I hope is seductive. "I'm not so good anymore."

He clears his throat. "I'm headed to your sister's wedding."

April's wedding is why I'm in town after three years away. I plan to spend the next week at the campgrounds on the edge of Sweetgrass River with our friends and family. I should have known that Josh would be included on the guest list despite the fact that I've barely spoken to him in five years.

"Then I'll let you get to it." I turn to my bike.

"Give me a ride."

For a moment, I think about what it would be like to pull Josh in the tall grass on the side of the road and spend a few sweaty hours letting our bodies tangle together. But something tells me he's not talking about that kind of ride.

I pause, working to hide the victory smile. "Ask me nicely, Rawlins."

He moves behind me, tugging gently on my arm until I face him. "What if I offered you something in exchange?"

I lick my bottom lip slowly, watching the way his eyes track my movement. "And what might that offer be?"

He steps closer, crowding my space. "What do you want?" His tone is deep, the way it always was in my teenage fantasies. Except I'm not that lonely girl hoping to impress him anymore.

I hook an arm around his shoulders and drag a finger down the center of his blue t-shirt that fits his body like he was born into it. "How about the six pack in your truck?"

He chuckles. "Nice try, Miss Under Twenty-One."

My birthday is in five days, which reminds me of my birthday goal: cash in my V-card finally.

I don't move my finger, despite the tingles that run through my body at the slight connection to Josh. I bet he would be a hell of a first time. "Are you worried you'll corrupt me?"

He stares at me for a long moment. "Something tells me that already happened."

The words sting but I'm not about to admit that little June is still untouched. "Then what's one more moment of sin?"

Josh gives me another slow onceover.

The good-looking guy who was once my best friend has become a sexy-as-sin man. Beneath my fingertips, his breathing is fast, belying the calm smile. He's not as unaffected as he's acting. The thought sends a thrill through me.

"Do you happen to be looking for your next sin?" The drawl in his voice does something funny to my insides.

I'm pretty sure I have him where I want him. So, I lean close to his ear, letting my breath fan his face. "Kiss me and I'll let you know."

Josh angles his head until there's only an inch of space between our faces. "No, sweetheart. I don't kiss a girl unless I plan to stay for all four innings."

His fingers ghost along the outside of my thigh, just beneath the hem of my skirt. Even without touching me, there's an answering spark of electricity through my body.

I shouldn't have expected anything less than a baseball analogy from Sweetgrass River's very own star batter.

He was offered a college scholarship, the equivalent of winning the lottery in this tiny one-horse town. But he turned it down to raise his brothers. Without him, they would have gone into the foster system.

For a moment, I consider closing the distance between our lips. "Thought a balk was against the rules, thirteen."

"Only by the pitcher." He steps away. "Are you going to give me that ride now?" His smirk tells me he intended the double entendre.

"You think you can handle it?" I'm trying to act just as unaffected as he is.

Josh laughs at this. "You'd be surprised by what I can handle."

I sling a leg over the bike and settle on it. Then I toss him a smile over my shoulder. "Let's see your skills."

He climbs on behind me, his body bumping against mine and suddenly the summer air feels electric. He wraps his

arms around my curvy hips. When he speaks, his breath tickles my ear, and his light stubble scratches my cheek. "You're up to bat, Abbott."

I hit the kickstand and crank the ignition, delighting in the feel of the powerful machine underneath my body and the sexy man behind me. For a second, I let myself imagine we're running away together.

I turn the bike, and Josh adjusts his posture as he leans into the turn, as if he's trying to protect me.

The entire ride is like being slowly tortured. Josh's hands sliding around my hips, his chest pressing against my back.

"I owe you a favor," Josh says in my ear when I finally pull into the entrance for the campgrounds, the bike still growling beneath us.

I fight the urge to shiver at the sexy promise in his words as I stop the Ducati in a space at the edge of the parking lot. "I'll collect."

He chuckles and the vibration rumbles through my back. "I look forward to that."



## Chapter Two

### *June*

I find my sisters in the main lodge. They're sitting at the table, making pretty candle votives. Apparently, these are supposed to be centerpieces at the wedding.

I take a seat at the table and watch while May passes me some supplies and rattles off a list of instructions.

April, my oldest sister and the soon-to-be bride, gives me a sly look. "You and Josh looked cozy riding in here."

I roll my eyes, trying to ignore the way my neck warms. "I gave him a ride because he's still holding onto that shitty truck."

May frowns. "I miss when he used to come around. Seems like he just stopped one day."

After I kissed him that day, Josh walked away from me and my family. He stopped spending time with all of us.

"Just to be clear," April says, "I wouldn't mind a double wedding and May has enough supplies to make it happen."

May pauses in her centerpiece. "Say the word and I'll have it done."

She started an event planning business here in Sweetgrass River and she's booked solid for months in advance. Her events are always considered perfect. Just like she is, the town's beloved darling.

I chuckle. "He'd be one unwilling groom. Speaking of grooms, where is yours?"

"Aaron's on gazebo duty." April's blue gaze looks misty and she sighs, practically swooning. "He's building me a gazebo."

I wish our parents were here with us. I swallow past the lump in my throat. It seems wrong that life has continued on without them.

"Hey, no bragging about your man," May says.

She glances at her day planner that is open on the table before turning to me. "You're still in charge of dinner, right?"

Tonight, April's hosting a huge dinner at the main lodge to mark the beginning of her wedding celebration. Most of our family and all of our friends will be there for the BBQ supper.

"Consider it done," I tell her.

April couldn't have a better maid of honor than May. The three of us made a pact when we were young about taking turns to be the maid of honor so everyone would get their chance.

But planning is where May really shines, and I want that for her. Besides, I'm on hair and makeup. As a beauty vlogger, those are my areas of expertise.

After helping with the remaining centerpieces, I get started on preparing dinner for nearly thirty people. The task keeps me busy but not busy enough to forget about Josh. Or that sexy motorcycle ride.

Knowing Josh, he'll completely ignore me now that he's here. Except I have no intention of letting that happen because I want my best friend back.

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## *Josh*

I haven't been able to stop thinking about June all day. Damn near killed Tyler, my brother, when I swung that post too close to his head. Thankfully, he knows how to duck.

I survey the start to the wedding gazebo and roll the muscles in my neck as I think again about that motorcycle ride. I'd be lying if I said I didn't press against June the entire time on purpose.

All I could think about as her muscles tensed while we sat on top that vibrating machine was how badly I want to be inside her one of these days. *You still owe her a favor.*

"You're looking like a man who needs a woman under him," Finn, my youngest brother, observes as he claps my shoulder.

"Ain't that the truth," I say, accepting the beer he passes my way. I take a long swig, my mind still on the one woman I can't have. *You'd ruin her.*

Walking away from June's smile, her easy friendship, and her infectious laugh was the hardest thing I've ever done.

"I heard June dropped you off," Aaron observes as he sips his own beer. He's acting nonchalant but he's studying me too closely. This is the problem with growing up together. Everybody knows the secrets you try to hide.

Finn wiggles one of the posts of the gazebo and it comes loose. He cusses then scowls at it. "She's single these days."

June is a bit of a celebrity online. She does stuff with makeup on the internet. I didn't realize Finn was following her though.

Tyler shakes his head and passes Finn his bottle. He wedges the post back in place correctly. "A wedding is a great time to hook up. Do you reckon I got a chance with her, Josh?"

My fingers tighten around my beer. "What are you asking me for?" Some dark, ugly feeling I can't identify runs through my veins.

"You were her friend. You knew her best." Tyler takes his beer back from Finn and guzzles half of it. He pins me with a look. "Any insider tips for getting in her panties?"

I take a step toward him, the blood pounding in my ears. "Listen, you little shit—"

He flashes me a grin and holds out a hand to Finn. "I told you he still wants her."

Just like that I realize the two of them were playing me. Goading me into a reaction and I gave it to them.

Finn pulls a twenty from his wallet and passes it to Tyler. Then he clinks his beer against Ty's. "Best twenty I ever spent. Well, after the one I paid Luann to flash me."

The conversation between the two quickly dissolves into a comparison of which women in town have the best tits.

Uninterested in their discussion, I turn and toss my bottle into the campground trashcan. Then I start on the path to the cabin I'm staying in.

Aaron quickly catches up to me. "She's not sixteen anymore."

I grunt. Damn if I didn't know that after our bike ride. Feeling all of her soft curves, the way her hips fit perfectly in my hands. Yeah, little June has definitely become a woman.

He bumps my shoulder. "But don't upset her. That would upset my soon-to-be wife."

I accept Aaron's warning with a nod and let the conversation end there.

Back at my cabin, I take a quick shower. I got placed in a small, one-bedroom place with my siblings. They're grown now but they still act like kids.

When I get out, Lexie and Tyler are bickering over who gets the top bunk.

I pass Finn a look, used to seeing those two argue. Tyler and Finn are my siblings by blood. Lexie was just a lost kid who desperately needed a home and somebody to look out for her. Teenage me raised three kids, a fact that still amazes me some days.

"Settle something for us," Lexie says. "They put us in the same cabin because we're family, right?"

Tyler shakes his head. "They did it because we're all single. Mind as well have called this cabin The Lonely Boners."

"That should be your stage name," Finn teases, grinning down at his phone. That's the face he makes when he's got a woman.

I'm guessing that Lexie is right, and we all got stuck in here because we're family. I'm Aaron's best man so I know why I'm here. But Southern hospitality is a funny thing and

sometimes invitin' one person means you're invitin'  
everyone.

I ignore their discussion and slip from the too warm cabin  
into the evening air. It's a short jaunt to the main lodge  
where we're having dinner tonight.

Rumor is June is in charge of that. I figure if I stop by, I can  
complete the favor I owe her and spend the next few days  
avoiding her.



# Chapter Three

## June

I'm in the kitchen with my sisters and Aaron when I sense Josh's presence. I thought after years of barely spending time together, I wouldn't still have that. The sixth sense that lets me know when he's nearby. But it's just as sharp as ever.

"Sheriff," Aaron calls out.

Despite the way Josh suddenly dropped my entire family, my sisters and Aaron have never seemed to hold it against him.

Truth is, they all love Josh because he saved me from getting hit by a car when I was eleven. Then he rescued me again when I almost drowned at the community pool when I was fourteen.

I turn from the pot where I'm stirring the noodles for April's favorite mac and cheese dish. "You didn't tell me you were the sheriff now."

There was a time when I was the first person he'd tell about any good news in his life, and it was the same for me. *I miss those days.*

He leans against the doorjamb, the slight motion tugs his white t-shirt higher, giving me a glimpse of taut, tan skin just above the waistband of his jeans. The sight reminds me of my birthday plan. "Would it have stopped you from rolling through those three stop signs?"

I point a wooden spoon at him. "It was two."

"The town elected him unanimously," Aaron tells me. I wonder how I could have missed this bit of town gossip. Seems like one of my sisters should have mentioned it on our weekly Skype calls.

Josh's mouth quirks. "I was running unopposed." He nods to the list on the counter. "Let me do the grocery run."

I hate the grocery shopping, which means he'll probably think he's paying back that favor. But it's not gonna happen

that easily.

"Take my Camry," May encourages. "Keys are over there on the island."

Josh returns over an hour later with every item on the list. I unpack the bags on the island while he hovers behind me.

My sisters are setting the tables in the dining area so we're alone in an awkward silence that neither of us seem capable of breaking.

At the bottom of the bag, I spot the package of black licorice. It was my favorite as a kid, and Josh would always get it for me. The unexpected gesture is sweet but also confusing as hell. Is he trying to be friends again?

I turn to ask him about it as his phone rings.

He pulls it from the pocket of his snug, worn jeans. "Dispatch," he mouths the word to me.

"Yeah, put Mrs. Carson through." He pauses to listen for a moment. "Well, of course, I agree. Racoons knocking over your trashcan are a nuisance and Deputy Luke should be taking this seriously."

He pinches the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes as the grumpy old woman on the other end continues to berate him for not doing a better job as a trusted town leader.

Josh listens with endless patience, not interrupting or defending himself. That's what I've always liked about Josh. He can absorb other people's moods and soothe them with a soft answer.

When he finally gets Mrs. Carson calm, he agrees to save her a dance at April's wedding reception.

He ends the call on a good note then rakes a hand through his short, brown hair. "This is the dark and dangerous side of being a small town sheriff."

"Those racoons sound like quite the bandits." I scoop the baked macaroni into the serving bowl and grin to let him know I'm teasing.

He smirks. "Their wanted poster hangs on my bulletin board." He nods to the dish I'm holding. "I'll take that, and

we'll call the favor even."

I hold the bowl out of reach. "Not so fast, Sheriff. It was my favor to receive and I didn't ask you to go grocery shopping."

The smirk fades. "Well, then what do you want?" He barks the words, looking annoyed with me for not going along with his little plan.

I chew my lower lip, noticing the way heat flares in his gaze. My heart skips a beat as I remember that look. It's the one he gave me in the truck that night that made me think despite everything he was saying he wanted me too.

"Don't play games with me," he demands.

"I ain't ever played games with you." My voice comes out even despite the anger that builds in me at his words. *I'm not the one who ran away like a coward.*

"Just tell me what you want as a favor so I can do it and get gone."

There it is. The real reason he keeps hanging around tonight. He doesn't want to feel in my debt anymore.

The thought sends a wave of sadness through me. When I was younger, we could spend hours together. Usually with me babbling and him sitting in silence.

But that was the thing about it. He didn't tune me out like so many other people did. He would actually listen to me—to all of my hopes and dreams and thoughts. He never judged me for any of it either.

"I'll let you know when I decide what the favor will be." I breeze past him.

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For dinner, I get placed across from Josh and his brothers. My sister is on the left with me while Aaron and April are at the head of the table.

The conversation is stilted and awkward at first. Everybody trying to play nice even though there's so much

history in this room that it feels as if it's crushing all the joy out of the celebration.

Finally, Aaron turns to me. Like he always does. Like everyone does. He asks me about my work.

I paste on the world's biggest smile, wondering why nobody ever realizes it's fake.

"Just June, my makeup line, is coming to stores. We're already working with a spring launch in mind and the colors have been chosen so at this point, it's a matter of moving into production testing and from there, I'll be getting some of my friends to help me promote it. Then we'll be waiting to finalize some of the sponsorship clauses." I stop for a breath when I realize I've been babbling again.

My sisters make noises of admiration despite my torrent of words.

Aaron frowns. "What does all that mean?"

He and April were angry when I told them I was quitting college to start a makeup show online. But now, I've crossed over ten million followers and make more than enough to support myself comfortably in Seattle.

Of course, I hate my roommates, the weather sucks, and I feel lonely all the time. But I'm not about to admit defeat to everyone and come home.

Josh answers Aaron's question. "Her makeup will be in drugstores across the country by the end of next year. Her popularity is exploding among Gen Z. Investors expect the brand to be worth a few million soon and to double in value within two years."

*He's been paying attention to me.* The thought does something funny to my insides. "I didn't realize you followed my career. Or that you know what Gen Z is."

I gave him a paper sunflower after his mama died. He sent me a bouquet of real sunflowers after that fight with April and Aaron. Not a word on the card, but I knew who they were from.

*Josh believes in me.* The thought kept me going on the days I had to eat cheap noodles to keep the lights on.

“Well, in between playing cops and robbers, I manage to read. Mainly small words. Lots of pictures,” he drawls.

Tyler flips the conversation back to Josh’s beat-up truck and something about a hike, but I end up completely zoning out. Why would Josh be following my career? I thought he didn’t care about me anymore.



# Chapter Four

## *Josh*

It stung to see the surprise in June's eyes. I've followed her career for years. I've seen every makeup tutorial she's posted online, especially the lipstick ones that make my pants too damn tight.

Still, I force the thoughts of her away as I flick on the cabin light the next morning. Finn flips me the bird.

"What the hell is this?" Lexie groans from her top bunk.

"This is the sunrise hike you morons agreed to." I intentionally put too much pep in my voice just to be annoying.

It's our tradition. Every time we came here to camp, I'd take the three of them to Crescent Falls where we could watch the sunrise together.

Finn rolls off his bunk and hits the floor in his bare feet. He lets out a hiss when he realizes Tyler or Lexie put syrup where he'd land. "I'm gonna kill someone."

I pass him Tyler's t-shirt to wipe his feet on and tell him we have a lot of ground to cover. He cleans up in the bathroom then emerges just as Tyler and Lexie are scrambling out of their beds.

"I'll meet you up at the main lodge," Finn tells me as he hefts his backpack onto his shoulder.

I nod and double-check my supplies. While the four of us are familiar with the trail, hiking in the dark can be tricky even for those who are experienced.

I'm the last to join the group at the lodge. When I arrive, May and June are there, too. They're deep in conversation with Finn and I realize he must have invited them along on our sunrise adventure.

The seven of us used to hike together. But I don't see Aaron and April right now. So, I ask Finn about them.

He snickers. "Would you rather be hiking at dawn or in bed doing your soon-to-be wife?"

May smacks his shoulder. "Gross. Don't talk about my sister that way."

June yawns and covers her mouth, looking sleepy with her blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail. My fingers itch to pull the band from her hair, to watch it spring around her face the way it does when she hasn't put any product in it. Her face is makeup free, my favorite of her looks.

Tyler claps me on the back. "Come on, last one onto the trail makes the rest of us pancakes."

Lexie and Tyler race into the dark fearlessly. Finn and May aren't far after them, leaving June at the back of the group with me.

After giving my eyes a few seconds to adjust to the darkness on the trail, I pause to listen. An owl hoots in the distance, the breeze moves through the sweetgrass. The nearby river bubbles as the katydids sing their summer song.

"It's a perfect night to hike," June says.

Up ahead, I spot Finn tugging May onto a private trail, and I fight a smile. That seems like the most unlikely pairing.

"There are some beautiful trails around Seattle," she continues.

I have a price alert set on plane tickets to Seattle. I check it every week. I've thought about showing up on her doorstep a thousand times. But what would I even say?

"Do you like it there?"

"I think you'd really enjoy the trails. Plum Falls is my favorite. It's a twenty-five-foot waterfall, not as big as Crescent Falls obviously. It's noisy and there are a lot of tourists, not like here where everything is quiet and peaceful." She pauses for a breath and this is one of the things I missed about her. How much she talks.

I came to pick her up from school when she was young, and the teacher was lecturing her on talking too much.

Watching her little blue eyes fill up made me realize how often adults dismissed her as a bother just because she liked to talk. I promised myself that day that I would always take the time to listen to June.

She nudges me in the side, and I stop for a garden snake to slither across our path.

Once it's gone, she continues with her descriptions of Plum Falls. "But there is a firepit area and you can walk a dog. Not that I have one. I'm thinking of adopting from the local no-kill shelter. They always run good deals around Christmas time. Maybe something small, like a cocker spaniel. I want a dog that's kind of spunky."

*Like you.* The thought makes me smile.

The trail turns into a steep climb, and I gesture for her to go ahead.

She steps in front of me, balancing her foot on a rock jutting out. The sheer climb up the waterfall is half the thrill of Crescent Falls. "You should come out sometime. We could roast hotdogs and marshmallows. Maybe sleep under the stars like we did when we were kids." She has to raise her voice to be heard over the rushing water.

We can't go back to being friends. I want her too damn badly for that and I'm not going to hurt sweet little June. Still, that's no reason to rain on her parade.

"That sounds like fun."

I wait until she's a few feet above me before I step on the rock where she was. I run my fingers along the wet cliff in the twilight, looking for purchase.

She laughs then but the sound lacks amusement. "I don't even know what I'm saying. We're not friends anymore. Blame it on the night and the ride into town and the crazy stress I'm under."

Not being June's friend hurts me. But being June's friend would hurt her. It made the decision to walk away from her all those years ago a no-brainer. That doesn't mean I don't wish it couldn't all be different.

To distract her, I say. "What are you doing for your birthday?"

"I'm not telling you." She grunts as she lifts herself up even higher. There's a ledge here, just large enough for two people. She stops and rests on it, letting her legs dangle. If she falls, it's probably thirty feet down.

I pull myself up beside her, realizing too late my mistake. This ledge was plenty big when we were kids. But we ain't little no more and her thigh is pressed firmly against mine, her elbow digging into my side. If I turn my face, I could place a kiss on her lips.

She shifts, trying to shimmy out of her backpack.

I put a hand on her shoulder. "Stay still." The last thing I need is her knocking both of us off this ledge.

I manage to open her backpack, pulling free her water. I twist the cap off, trying to ignore the way my arm accidentally brushes across her soft t-shirt as I pass it to her. My mouth goes dry as I think about what's under there.

She inhales sharply. Clearly, she's thinking about the same thing I am.

"Come on. What are you doing to celebrate?" At this point, self-preservation is forcing me to keep the conversation going.

Otherwise, I might just try for that kiss which would lead to other things. Because years of wanting June have been bottled up inside me and if it ever comes out, then I'll take her the way I've always wanted to.

I twist the cap off my water and take a long guzzle, forcing myself to stop thinking about doing my former best friend.

"Well, I wasn't sure. It's a big deal, turning twenty-one. I'm officially an adult, you know? So, I thought I should do something special. I kept thinking about it then I decided to hell with it, I'll celebrate by losing my virginity."



# Chapter Five

## *June*

After my little speech about my birthday plans, Josh sputters over his water. It probably shouldn't delight me but surprising him gives me some small measure of satisfaction. *See, I'm a grown woman.*

I thump him on the back, trying not to notice how strong and warm his muscles are beneath my hand. Or how much my skin tingles just from touching his t-shirt clad back.

"That's where I need your help," I add.

"Fuckno," he says the phrase so quickly the two words sound like one.

I ignore him. I didn't expect this would be easy when the idea popped into my head a second ago. "I'm calling in my favor."

"I'm not having sex with you in the name of a favor." Josh's jaw is tight.

"Relax." I pat his knee. "You're the last guy I'd ever want to do it with. You're too much of a straight arrow and you're not even my type anyway."

All lies but he doesn't need to know that.

I'd always hoped Josh would be my first. But since that ship seems to have sailed, it's time to move on. I need to find a guy who'll help me stop thinking about Josh, about wanting things he'll never be interested in giving me.

"What's the big deal about being a virgin at your age? Not like you're thirty or anything."

I sigh. "All of my girlfriends have been with lots of guys. Then there's me, little untouched June. And it's all your fault that I've never been laid."

"How do you figure that one?" Outrage colors his tone.

"Everybody thought I was your girl in high school. The boys wouldn't come near because of that." I hate this tight little ledge where I can't even cross my arms.

"Who told you that malarkey?" He snorts. "If the guys in your class lacked the balls to ask you out, maybe they weren't worthy of you in the first place."

How did asking for a favor turn into this stupid argument?

"Help me find somebody who will lay me. You know all of the guys at the wedding party better than me. Direct me to the best dick and you've done your part. I can't even believe you're making a big deal out of this. I only asked for one tiny favor."

The birds begin their early morning love songs as I consider shoving Josh off this ledge.

He shakes his head. "What do they put in the water on the West Coast?"

I try to appeal to him as his friend—well, former friend. "I'm lonely."

He snorts. "You're not lonely. You're horny. There's a difference."

"And since when did you become the expert on all things love and sex?" I demand. Ask a guy for one tiny favor and watch him completely flip out.

"You're the one asking for help. I think it's clear who the expert is." His tone has that cocky note that's so damn annoying.

I blow out a breath. "Fine. I'll find a guy on my own."

He mutters something under his breath that sounds like, "Good luck with that."

But I ignore him and move to the end of the ledge. I kick a pebble and listen. After several long seconds, it finally connects with the ground. It's a sobering reminder to stay focused on the climb, despite the fact that I'm ticked off at my climbing partner.

He watches me position my foot on the next ledge. I test it, making sure it will hold my weight before I lean into it.

"Don't you date?" He stands, hitching his backpack higher.

I can feel his gaze on my body and for a second, I wonder if he's enjoying the view. I instantly dismiss the thought.  
“I've been busy building an empire.”

We climb in silence for over half an hour before Josh finally asks, “Why haven't there been any ambitious guys in your work trying to get into those tight little pants of yours?”

I risk a glance down, spotting only the top of his dark hair. I wish I could see his expression, to gauge what he meant about my pants.

“I work in the makeup industry,” I remind him. “Most of the guys I meet have boyfriends of their own.”

Sweat beads down my back and my arms burn from the strain of supporting my weight. “Besides, I like Southern boys.”

“Still, you should take your time. Find a nice guy, date him for a while, make sure you really know him. There's no point in rushing just because of your age.”

I can't figure out why Josh would care. Sure, we almost had a moment when I was younger. But he was insistent that the feelings weren't mutual.

“I want to get laid, not married.”

As I say the words, I find the top of the jagged rock and breathe a sigh of relief. With one last heave, I pull myself up to the top of the waterfall. I let my legs dangle over the edge but stay out of the way for Josh.

Seconds later, he pulls himself up beside me and grins, looking just as sweaty and exhausted as I feel. “I've got to stop skipping leg day.”

Despite the fact that Josh is fit, I doubt he's ever seen the inside of a gym. He'd rather get sweaty doing natural things like climbing outdoors...and probably doing pretty women. The thought makes me sick and I push away the mental image of some faceless woman in bed with Josh.

In the distance, pink ribbons are just beginning to light the sky. I nudge his shoulder. “It's starting. Where are the

others?"

As soon as I ask the question, I realize what this is. There were three guys and three girls on the hike. But only two of us actually went to see a sunrise.

He offers me a protein bar. He didn't even bring the good kind with chocolate pieces in it.

I wrinkle my nose. "Yours always taste like chewy sawdust." I open my backpack and produce chocolate bars. "Do you want one of mine?"

"Enjoy your sugar crash later," he mutters around a bite of his sensible choice. He doesn't look like he's enjoying it. But I guess that's Josh in a nutshell. Mr. Responsible and Restrained. For a second, I wonder what it would be like to see him lose control. To be under him while he did.

My cheeks heat at the thought. "What was your first time like?"

The question tumbles from my lips before I think it through then I can't seem to help adding more humiliation to this moment. "I mean, I've asked my girlfriends and they've all talked about it. But I've never heard about it from a guy's perspective. I'd think it'd be kind of weird to put part of my body into someone else's. But I guess, maybe if it feels good, that's different."

*Oh, shit, June. Just shut up.*

Josh stares out at the sunrise without saying a word.

Finally, I sigh. "Don't ignore me. Everybody else does that when I talk."

He swallows a bite of the sawdust bar. "I've never ignored you. I like how much you talk. But sometimes, I'm processing."

His words warm me. Josh has been one of the few people that could tolerate my constant babbling.

"Oh," I swing my legs and take another bite of my chocolate. "Guess I do kind of share every thought in my head. Have you ever tried that? Like just said all the stuff you wanted to say? I mean, what's the big deal anyway? Not

like I'm going to judge you if you tell me about your sexual past. I don't even have one so how could I judge?" I give a nervous laugh and finally stop talking.

He sighs and it's a weary sound. "I'm not discussing my sex life with you."

"There you guys are!" Lexie calls out. She turns to Tyler and scowls at him. "I told you that shortcut sucked."

The two of them join us on the edge of the waterfall. Lexie takes a seat next to Josh, and I notice he doesn't pull away from her the way he did with me on the ledge.

He offers the other half of his sawdust bar to her and she accepts it. *Of course, she does.*

Tyler takes a seat beside me. He nudges the bag beside me. "Is that one of those coconut chocolate bars?"

It's obvious it is. But I've always liked Tyler, so I nod toward the bag. "It's yours if you want it."

The four of us drift into silence for a few minutes, watching the sky grow progressively lighter. Finally, I ask. "Did you guys see May on the way up here?"

"I think she's on a different kind of shortcut," Lexie offers.

Josh exchanges a grin with her. For the first time, I wonder if Lexie is on the list of Josh's past women.

The thought puts a knot in my stomach. There are probably women all over town who know exactly how to touch him, who have pleased him countless times. Then there's me. The girl he won't even look twice at.

But it's fine. Because I'm going to find a really nice guy and get under him. It's no big deal that Josh doesn't want me.



# Chapter Six

## *Josh*

*Sticky.*

June is chatting up Stu “Sticky Fingers” Brewer that night at the bonfire. She’s talking to him and laughing at all of his jokes and flipping her hair over her shoulder. She’s done something to it. Made it straight and sleek, not at all like the normal mess of curls I want to run my fingers through.

Watching her flirt is driving me nuts. She can’t be seriously thinking about going after him, can she?

I take another swig from my water bottle and study them from the edge of the circle. Why did she have to tell me about her virginity? I’d be just as happy not knowing that she’s untouched, that her body has never been explored by a man.

My fingers tingle at the thought of caressing her, stroking her. At getting to be the first one—hell, the only one—to touch June.

But that can’t happen. I knew that the day she kissed me. She’d always dreamed of getting out of Sweetgrass River. Just like my mom. The only difference is that my mom settled for my daddy’s sorry ass and a life she hated.

I couldn’t do that to June no matter how much I wanted her under me back then. I still won’t be the selfish asshole who hurts her like that.

I force back the longing as June’s soft, throaty laughter reaches my ears. There was a time when I could make her laugh like that. When our friendship was light and easy. Not this heavy, awkward thing it is now.

June moves from the bonfire to the table where the snacks are set up. She’s loading up a plate filled with food. Food she’ll probably feed to Sticky.

I leave the spot where I’ve been standing all night and approach her. “Sticky, huh?”

She glances over her shoulder. “He’s attractive. Why not?”

“The girls call him Icky Sticky since he got that rash on his junk.” I don’t bother telling her that in the past six months, I’ve had to serve him restraining orders from three different women. It’ll be a cold day in hell before I let her hook up with a cockroach like him.

She beams at me. The glow from the bonfire adds orange highlights to her shiny blonde hair. “See? This is perfect! This is exactly the sort of insider information I wanted from you.”

I grunt. “I’m not interested in being your wingman.”

She surveys the rest of the gathered crowd. “If not Sticky, who would be your best suggestion? Tyler seems nice.”

“Come on a drive with me.”

“Ooh, a strategy session. I like it. This is why we’ve always been such good friends. You’re the brains of the operation and I’m the pretty one. Although that’s not to say you couldn’t be the pretty one. But I’m probably not the brains of it. Except I do have my own company now so maybe I am a better strategist than I give myself credit—”

I take the paper plate from her hands and plop it down on the table. The sudden move causes her to stop talking for a minute.

I wrap my fingers around her wrist and tug her to the camp parking lot where Deputy Luke returned the truck. Finn got it running again this afternoon though he told me it still needs some major work.

“Where are we going? Does this demand total secrecy? Are we like on one of those secret missions?”

I yank on the passenger door. “I’m going to buy you a milkshake.”

As soon as I’m in the driver’s side, she rolls down her window and lets the mountain breeze in. “Home always has a particular smell. Have you ever noticed that? I mean, take here for example. It always smells like pine trees and wet earth and woodsmoke. Most days, I want to come home to

Sweetgrass River again, back to where my roots are, you know?"

She continues to babble ninety miles an hour as I drive down the curving mountain road.

I listen, adding in an occasional comment whenever she pauses long enough to catch her breath.

When I pull into the drive-in diner, I order two burgers all the way with onion rings and milkshakes.

She frowns. "I had a hotdog at the bonfire. But I guess I could have a little something."

Next thing I know, she's eaten her burger, onion rings, and half of my rings. She talks the entire meal. Mainly about her plans for her makeup business and how excited she is that the launch is getting closer.

When we're done eating, I park in a vacant lot where we won't be disturbed. But there's enough streetlight to provide illumination so I can see her facial features and watch all of her expressions.

Tonight, her eyes have deep brown makeup around them, and her lips are a soft, glossy pink color. She did a tutorial on how to draw a cupid's bow and damn if I didn't watch that video a dozen times.

She finally takes a long sip from her milkshake. I watch in fascination as her cheeks hollow, trying not to think about the other thing I want to see her suck on.

"So, what's first on the strategy agenda?"

I used to do this with my siblings when they were teenagers. I'd take them out one-by-one on milkshake runs. Give them a chance to talk about anything and everything they needed to.

Sometimes, we talked about the burdens they each carried or the shittiness of having parents who don't give a damn about you. But also, we talked about sex. I always brought the topic up first. I wanted them to know they could ask me questions and I'd do my best to give them accurate information.

"Sweetheart, how much do you know about sex?" The last thing I want to do is embarrass her, but I also can't stand the idea that she might go into a sexual encounter and not know how to protect herself.

She snorts and the slightest blush starts across her cheeks. "I know how it works."

For some reason, I love seeing that blush. I love the way she's innocent. Swallowing down the things I want to confess, I say, "And what do you know about protection?"

She sighs and anger flashes in her eyes. "I know how not to get knocked up, OK? I'm on birth control pills and what do you care anyway? It's not like you're sleeping with me, so you don't have a right to know anything. You should mind your own business for once."

I keep my cool and stay focused on the issue. I raised three teenagers who regularly lashed out at me. "I'm covering the bases and making sure that your body and your heart are protected."

"Just worry about Lexie." She crosses her arms over her open flannel shirt.

"What does Lexie have to do with this?" I've known June for ten years and sometimes, I still can't follow her thoughts to save my life.

"You don't have to act like that." She rolls her eyes. "Those secret smiles you were exchanging with her. The way she sat so close to you. I'd be an idiot not to pick up on the fact that you're sleeping together."

"Lexie is practically my sister." A slow realization hits me, a realization that makes me feel special. "Are you jealous, June?"

"What? No. That's crazy. I mean, maybe I sorta liked you one time. But that was years ago, and you brushed me off and that was that. It would be weird and stalkerish to say I liked you again. Unless you liked me. But you don't like me. Although, you did offer me some of your chewy sawdust bar. And you still listen to my boring stories. And you bought me

a milkshake. But we're just friends and that's crazy. This is crazy. Why would you even ask that?"

I turn to stare out the driver's side window, so she won't see the stupid grin on my face. Knowing she still likes me after all this time sends a thrill through me.

She thumps my shoulder. "Stop sitting over there smiling and laughing at me. I know you think it's funny that little June has another crush on you and it's got to be a real ego boost to you that once again—"

Before I can stop myself, I turn toward June and slide my lips over hers. Because for one second, I want to be selfish.



# Chapter Seven

## *Josh*

I meant to take a quick taste, to feel her soft lips against mine for the first time in five years. To show myself that the memory of the single kiss when she was sixteen couldn't have been that good.

I trace her full lower lip with my tongue and then she's opening her mouth and I venture further in, tasting the sweet notes from her strawberry shake.

When I brush my tongue along the roof of her mouth, she shivers. The slight trembling is enough to have me pulling away from her.

I rake a hand through my hair, feeling like an asshole. She just confessed she had a crush on me, and I went and kissed her.

She reaches for her seatbelt, unbuckling it. Then she's sliding across the bench seat and straddling my lap before I realize what's happening.

"What are you doing?" I'm not sure which of us I'm asking as my hands find her hips. I love her full hips.

"Kiss me again." She lowers herself down onto me.

I lean my forehead against hers, feel the way her hair tickles my face. "Don't do this. I'm not strong enough to walk away from you right now."

I've been strong for her every day for five years. I come home to a dark house and an occasional new video from her. No matter how many times I see her number in my phone, I don't let myself call or text her.

She cups my face. "No one has to know."

It's not about who knows or who doesn't know. It's about not letting my jagged edges leave wounds on her heart. "We need to head back."

She lowers her lips to mine and kisses me, softly. Tentatively and that alone makes me groan.

Then my hands are sliding higher because I can't resist. I've got to feel every inch of her skin under my fingertips. I need to map her, to memorize what she feels like.

I run a thumb along the side of her breast, feeling the thickness of several layers of clothing. The barriers are keeping me from her, and I make a noise in the back of my throat, a growl of protest.

Still tracing her mouth with my tongue, I move my hand underneath her flannel shirt. Then under her soft cotton tank top until I'm connecting with the warm skin of her back and she shivers again.

I pull away from her mouth long enough to draw in a ragged breath. "I need to feel you."

She nods eagerly. "You smell really good. Do you use a special cologne or shower gel? It smells spicy but not too overpowering and it's still very masculine and..." She leans forward to press kisses against my neck. "It's... um... what was I saying?"

"Hell if I know," I murmur as I tug on her flannel shirt. There's only one thought consuming me right now and it's the idea that I have to feel as much of her skin against mine as I can.

She stops kissing me long enough to shrug out of the shirt and seems to be reading my mind because she instantly goes for her tank next. Then she's on my lap in just her bra. I wish I could see more of her. All of her, fully naked.

Instead, I reach for the clasp on her bra and flick it. The anticipation of seeing her topless has my balls tightening and my entire body tingling.

I tap the light in the cab because I don't want to miss this sight. I reach for the straps and pull them both down as slowly as I can stand it. She's got the prettiest breasts I've ever seen with tiny pink nipples that make my mouth water.

She tries to cover herself when I've bared her, but I grab both her wrists in one hand and tilt her chin up with my other one. "You're flawless."

Half her videos are her teaching her audience how to cover up. But I want all of June. I want to see and know every part of her.

“I want to see you, too.”

Her words surprise me. I’ve been so focused on getting to see her that I didn’t think about her wanting to see me.

I release her hands and let her help me out of my t-shirt. She runs her fingers down my chest and lets out a small noise of appreciation. “You’re built, Southern boy.”

“Come here.” I splay my hand on her back and push her toward me, relishing the moment her soft breasts connect with the hard planes of my chest. I’ve wanted this for so long, to be here with June. To be touching her like this.

She whimpers at the contact then pulls back only to rub her full breasts against my chest again and again. Her pointed tips scrape against me, creating friction I never dreamed could feel this good.

She squirms in my lap. “Is there a way to get—just a little bit...more?”

I reach for her thighs, putting my fingers between our bodies.

She instantly begins grinding against me. “That’s much better.”

She lets out a little sigh. “What can I do for you? I want you to feel good too. But I don’t know how to do that and if you’d just tell me...” Her breath comes in little pants as I palm the V between her legs.

The ache in my groin has reached a level ten and all I can think about is how amazing it is to have her hips grinding against me.

I change my direction when I realize she keeps using a circular motion for her hips.

“Keep that right there.” She makes a shuddering noise as her body tenses and I watch pleasure light up her features. It fills me with pride and wonder to get to give this to her, to know my touch is the one that made her feel so incredible.

After a long moment, she slumps forward against me. She buries her head against my neck. Her voice is muffled when she speaks, "Tell me what you want."

*A long night spent making love to you.* "Kiss me again."

She presses kisses to my neck and jaw before finally putting her lips against mine. She's hesitant at first but I open my mouth and let her tongue explore mine.

I move to trace her lips, but she closes around my tongue and sucks. A long, hard pull that sends heat straight to my cock and makes my balls tighten.

I shift my hips against her body and before I can stop it, there's light exploding behind my eyes. A rush of ecstasy consumes me until I can't think or speak. Suddenly, I'm coming right there against her.

She grins as my thighs clench, my whole body going rigid from the tension of the release barreling through me.

When it's over, shock floods through me. "Shit, I've never—that was—" Completely unexpected and amazing.

She brushes the hair from my forehead. "I liked watching it."

She shivers again and I realize she's sitting here topless. I lean forward and switch the knob for heat, groaning when our chests brush again. I didn't think it was possible, but I'm still turned on.

"Have sex with me." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. Because I need her. Years of ignoring this tension between us have reached a boiling point and I'm pretty sure if I don't get inside of her tonight, I'm going to die.



# Chapter Eight

## *June*

*Have sex with me.*

I swallow as the words replay in my head. This can't be happening. I've got to be dreaming. "To-tonight?"

"Tonight," he answers.

"Here?" I ask. *Shit, June. Use more words.*

He chuckles. "Do you remember that old hunting cabin at the edge of the campgrounds? It's empty."

"Alright." I can't believe I just agreed to this. I'm going to have sex with my best friend. It feels like Christmas and my birthday came on the same day.

He starts the truck, and we drive in silence back up the mountain to the campgrounds.

I let out a breath when he shuts off the ignition in the parking lot. "I need to do something first."

"Meet me in an hour," he answers. He leans forward to crush his lips against mine in a kiss so intense it leaves me panting and lightheaded.

"I won't be long," I promise. *Especially not after a kiss like that.*

After a quick shower and shaving my legs, I slip into a tight, red dress. I didn't think I'd have an opportunity to wear it when I was packing for the trip, but now I'm glad I brought it along.

With a deep breath for courage, I knock on the cabin door. There's a faint glow coming from one of the windows, so I know Josh is here.

He gives me the biggest grin and gestures for me to come inside.

The two-room cabin is already warm with a fire blazing in the fireplace. I step into the middle of it and take in how clean and cheerful it is. It used to be dusty and dirty, a place

I'd hide when I was getting drunk with my friends in high school.

The bed in the corner was a dirty mattress but it's a real bed now, nice and made up with pillows and blankets. "This looks cozier than I remember."

He shrugs. "I cleaned up a little."

It warms me to know he went to the effort to make this special. I set my bag on the floor and shift my weight from one foot to the next.

I glance around the small cabin and finally say the words I'm embarrassed to admit. "I don't know what we're supposed to do now. I mean, I do know." I blush. "I just don't get how to...I mean, like...just tell me what you want me to do."

Something in his gaze softens and he puts his hands on my hips, pulling me close. He rests his forehead against mine. "You look beautiful tonight."

"It's just a secondhand purchase from the thrift store. Did you know that they have really good deals if you shop the week after a big event like—"

His fingers are underneath my chin, lifting my head until I'm looking him in the eyes. "Turn around."

I do as he instructs, feeling him reach for the zipper of the dress. Cool air rushes to greet my back.

I dressed in a matching bra and thong set and I can only imagine the view Josh has. For a second, I wonder if he'll think it's silly that I tried to be sexy for him.

"Face me." Josh's voice is ragged with need, a fact that leaves me feeling shy and hopeful at the same time.

I turn to him, keeping my gaze fastened on the faux bear fur rug in front of the fireplace.

"Don't hide from me."

He skims his fingers along my jawline, stopping to caress my lips with his thumb before he skims lower to the neckline of the dress.

He tugs on it slowly, his breath coming in little pants as he works the delicate red material down my body.

His reaction thrills me. But I remind myself that this isn't a big deal. *He's seen a lot of naked women. Stop acting like you're special.*

He frees my arms from the sleeves with a surprising gentleness. Then he's back to the bodice of the dress. He stops when he gets it halfway down my body.

I'm suddenly aware that I'm once again nearly topless in front of Josh except for my bra. The realization has my nipples pebbling into sharp points. I fight the urge to cross my arms over my chest and instead let him stare at me.

"I like black lace," He murmurs before he drops his head. He sucks one of my nipples into his mouth through the thin material of my bra.

The same feeling I had when I was with Josh in the truck returns. It's a fluttering in my stomach followed by a tingling deep down low.

I push Josh's head closer and arch my back, trying to get him to take more of me. I had no idea this could feel so good.

He groans, suckling me deeper and sliding his hands around the side of my breasts, pushing them up higher so he can get a little bit more.

Just when I'm about to explode from the delicious warmth that's spreading through me, Josh switches to my other breast. He gives it the same slow, reverent treatment.

I finally can't take it anymore and tug on his hair.

He pulls away from me, looking as dazed as I feel.

I shift from foot to foot, trying to get comfortable. That same ache that was there in the truck is back again. Only it's stronger this time, more insistent. "I'm... I need..."

Understanding crosses Josh's face and he pulls me toward the bearskin rug. "Lie down." His words are raspy. "I'll cure that ache for you."

He helps me wiggle from the dress and I lie down, trying to ignore the butterflies dancing in my stomach. After waiting for five years, Josh is finally here with me. It feels wonderful and surreal at the same time.

He puts a hand on my thigh and runs his thumb along it gently. "Spread your legs for me."

I hesitate. I trust Josh entirely. He'll make this an amazing experience but suddenly I'm worried about my part. *What if I let him down? What if I can't get him off?*

"Please, my sunflower." It's a whispered plea.

The nickname is what does it. I've always loved the way he calls me that. Like I'm special to him. Like I own a piece of his heart that no one else ever will.

Slowly, I spread my legs, aware that my matching black panties are already soaked, and he'll see how eager I am for this. For him.

He reaches for the underwear, pulling them slowly down. His gaze sweeps over me and suddenly, the nearby fire feels ten degrees warmer.

Then he lowers his face and gently presses a kiss to the juncture of my thighs. "So beautiful." He murmurs before he moves his tongue along me.

I sigh and he does it again and again. He keeps a steady rhythm until I'm writhing against the rug, whispering his name as a release ten times more powerful than the one in his truck sweeps over me.

The aftershocks are still running through me as Josh crawls up my body and puts his forehead against mine, our breaths mingling together.

Only after I feel like I've stopped floating do I realize he's over me. I leverage my hips and rub against him. He's still clothed while I'm naked except for my bra.

I reach for his shirt. "I liked that."

"Me too," he mutters, nipping at the skin on my neck.

I free him from his shirt and run my hands along his chest, feeling all his muscles bunch under my touch.

He stops nipping at me and pauses, brushing the hair from my face. "Give me a second or I'll come right here."

I keep touching him anyway. "I want to see it."

He captures both my hands in one of his and I love it when he does that. I love the reminder that he's stronger than me. "I want to be in you."

I grin, projecting a confidence I don't quite feel. "Then get your damn pants off."

"You're a bossy thing when you're horny." He drops my hands and reaches for his pants.

I watch as he rolls on a condom, anticipation and excitement and nervousness all vying for my attention. I push them back and remind myself that this is Josh. My best friend. The man who always listens to my stories, believes in my work, and lets me have the last piece of black licorice even though I know he likes it just as much as I do.

When he turns to me, he slides over my body again. He traces my folds with his fingertips and closes his eyes. "So wet for me."

Then he's slipping into my body and surprisingly, there's no pain. A small bit of pressure but then it's gone. Replaced only with a feeling of fullness and rightness.

Josh stays still for a long moment, his expression pained. "Are you OK?"

"More than." I press a kiss to the base of his throat.

He puts a hand between our bodies and circles me. His motions and quick thrusts create a delicious friction that has me crying out again within seconds.

He follows quickly after me. His body tensing and spasming inside of me. Then he's still and the only sound in the room is the crackling fire and our harsh breathing.

I giggle after a minute, feeling shaky and high. Like I've just stepped off the best amusement park ride ever. "That was fun."

"Understatement of the century," Josh murmurs as he rolls off of me. He tells me not to move then disappears into the

bathroom.

He's back again a few seconds later. He joins me on the rug, yanking a quilt off the bed. He covers us both with it and pulls me into his arms.

I snuggle into his embrace, liking the way I'm cocooned between his body and the fireplace. I run my fingers along his chest, tracing his skin over and over. Then I drift to sleep with the crackling fire as my soundtrack.



# Chapter Nine

## *Josh*

Waking up next to June is the best feeling. I watch her shallow breathing and study her peaceful expression. She looks beautiful and all I can think about is how she blushed last night when I made her come again and again in my arms.

She stirs in her sleep, and I know she'll be awake in a few minutes. It'll be the end of this. It's over now.

I had a glimpse of what I always wanted and it's time to go back to my regular life. The one where I come home from work, turn on the TV, and talk to the videos of her. Tell her about my day like she's actually across from me, listening.

It's not like we can ever have a future. She has a job that fills her with passion and it's on the other side of the country.

How many times did my mom lament not getting out of Sweetgrass? About the fact that my father convinced her to stay when she wanted to leave and pursue her acting dreams?

No matter how much I want more time like this with June, I can't bring myself to ask her to stay. I won't be my father.

I force myself from the bed and pad into the bathroom where I take a long shower and remember all the little noises June makes when I'm inside her. Noises I want to hear every night for the rest of my life.

When I pull back the shower curtain, June is sitting on the edge of the counter. She watches me with a pensive expression.

I grab a towel and wrap it around my waist, though why I'm not sure. It's not like we haven't seen every inch of each other at this point.

She tucks a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. "I thought maybe you had ducked out on me."

For a moment, I'm ten years old again. Coming home with my mama to find daddy's side of the closet empty. All his shoes, his socks, even his razors. Everything was gone. Because he'd run off with another woman and left my mom crying.

I step from the tub and cross the bathroom to stand in front of her.

"Never," I promise her. The word comes out sharp and fierce. I'd never abandon June. Surely, she has to know that. I kiss her forehead. "Never ever, June bug."

She wraps her arms around me and pulls me close in a tight embrace. Not for the first time, I'm aware that the strong, fierce woman is just an act, a mask she wears.

When she finally releases me, I reach for the shaving cream and apply it to my face. I try to ignore how right it feels to have June here while I'm getting ready.

She reaches for my razor on the side of the sink. "Let me. I used to help my grandpa when his hands got shaky."

She parts her knees and I step between them, ducking so she can reach my face and neck. It should be weird having a friend do such an intimate thing, but it just seems natural.

When she's done, she reaches for the hand towel and wipes the remainder of the cream away. She pauses when her fingertips caress my jaw. She leans forward to put her lips against my skin.

I run my thumb along her thigh. "Are you sore this morning?"

I need to touch her again. I figure if I'm only going to have June for a few stolen moments, I want enough memories to last a lifetime. I want to always remember how soft and warm she is. How she smells and what it feels like to watch her come apart when I'm buried deep inside her.

She wraps her legs around my hips and rocks against me. "I like being reminded of where you were."

I groan at her words and the connection between our bodies. I love feeling her heat against me, knowing I'll be

inside of her soon. "We can do other things."

"Don't you dare." She stops kissing my chest and glances up at me. There's something desperate in her gaze. "I want every moment we have together."

I nod because I feel the same desperation to hold onto this precious time.

We grind together until I can't take it anymore and I'm reaching for a condom, putting it on. Then I'm sliding into her body.

She lets out a hiss.

I instantly still. "Is it too much?"

The urge to thrust is intense, demanding I move inside her. But I ignore the instinct and force myself to stay motionless despite the fact that her wet heat is searing me in the best way.

She shakes her head and tightens her legs around my hip. "Don't stop. Please."

Then I'm in motion again, keeping my first few strokes shallow and unhurried. I'm trying to let her body get used to me again. I grit my teeth against my own need as her breathing turns into soft pants and she moans my name.

When she comes, it's so intense that it borders on pain for me. But I ignore it, choosing instead to focus on her expression. The wonder and the joy that cross her face leave me breathless.

*I love you, my sunflower.*

I sink my teeth into my lip to keep from saying those words. The ones I want so badly to admit. That I've wanted to tell her since she was sixteen.

But because I can't say it, I focus on showing her with my body. On letting it say the words that will never come from my lips.

Once we've both finished, I warm the water again and clean her up. I enjoy taking care of her afterwards almost as much as I enjoy sex.

She cups my face in her hand. “I want to move back to Sweetgrass. Give us a chance to be something.”

For a second, I let myself imagine what that would be like. Getting to be with June, learning all of her secrets each day and pleasing her every night.

Then I remember my mother’s heartbroken expression when she realized my dad was down at the local motel with his latest woman. *I could have had a better life if I’d never met your father.*

I clear my throat. “That’s not a good idea, June.”

Hurt flickers across her face and I steel myself against it. “Why not?”

It’s better that I hurt her now than later. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I were the reason she looked up one day and found herself living a life she hates. “Because I don’t want you that way.”

Her expression falls and she reaches for my hand. “But we just shared something so beautiful.”

I force myself to interrupt her, unable to hear the truth of how good we are together. “We’ve had some great sex this past week, and it’s natural that you’d feel—”

Tears slip down her face. “I’ve loved you since I was a kid. And you know the worst part of it? I know you love me too. But you’ll never say it.”

I shake my head, hating myself. Hating the way it feels like there’s a knife in my chest and a knife in hers and no way to end the pain for either of us.

“You do love me,” she insists. “You give me the last piece of licorice even though I know you like it more than me. You always send me flowers on my birthday even when we haven’t been talking for years. You call me sunflower every time we make love. And you don’t just call me sunflower. You call me *your* sunflower. Because I belong to you.”

She’ll always be my sunflower, but I can’t tell her that. I can’t condemn her to the life my mother led. “You admitted

you had a crush on me. It's natural that once we slept together that you would try to assign it a deeper meaning."

"And it's natural that being a coward, you won't let that happen. Who have you let close? Since your mom died, you don't let people in. Because you're afraid they're leaving you. Well, guess what? I am leaving. I can't keep doing this. I can't keep watching you like some puppy, hoping that you'll throw me a bone of affection every now and then."

She hops off the sink and moves to the door. The tears are still streaming down her face. With a soft hiccup, she whispers, "I don't want to be your friend ever again."



## Chapter Ten

### *Josh*

“I see your rubber and I raise you another one.” Tyler tosses a condom onto the table and stares me down. Apparently, the Lonely Boners’ poker game involves betting on condoms and lube.

I stare down at my tosser of a hand, wondering if I could win. But my brother looks too confident tonight.

June has avoided me all day and it’s taking every ounce of my self-control not to go to her and beg her to forget everything I said in the bathroom. But every time I start to, I think of my lonely mom and pull myself together.

“Shit or get off the pot.” Finn kicks me underneath the table.

“Leave him alone,” Lexie says. “He’s in love and miserable.”

“Well, who is responsible for that?” Tyler counters, sending Lexie a look I recognize from being with June. It’s the “if there weren’t other people around, we’d both be naked right now” look.

Finn puts his cards face down on the table. “Here’s the deal. You tell us how you screwed up with June and we’ll tell you how to fix it.”

“There’s nothing to fix.” I toss my hand in the middle of the table. “I’m folding.”

Lexie clucks her tongue. “You’re both miserable. There’s something that needs to be fixed.”

“What is this? Poker or a therapy visit?” I forgot how annoying these three could be when I get together with them, always prodding at me.

“I suspect the patient is heartbroken,” Finn quips, increasing the ante by three condoms. *Show off.*

“I don’t need to be analyzed, you bastards.”

"With signs of definite irritability," Lexie adds. She bumps Tyler's shoulder like they have a secret and tips her head toward me.

"What do you want me to do about it?" Tyler demands. "If the man wants to be miserable, let him be."

She scowls at him and tosses her cards into the center of the table.

Ty calls the bet, winning with a royal flush. He rakes his winnings toward himself, multi-colored foil packets. "It was because you couldn't perform, wasn't it?"

I flip him the bird.

Finn starts dealing a new hand.

Lexie snorts. "That's not the rumor going around."

I don't like the idea that people are talking about June's sex life, no matter what might be said. "Who'd you hear it from?"

"The woman herself." Lexie grins. "The way she talked you're a legend."

I swallow and pick up my cards. Of course, she'd say that. She doesn't have any experience. That's all it is. That's the only reason it felt like our bodies were made for each other every time I was inside her.

"She loves you." Lexie's voice is quiet. "You love her. What's the problem?"

"It won't work." I select two cards and toss them away, waiting for some fresh ones.

Lexie's gaze is on me, but I refuse to look up. I don't want to see what my siblings think about me in this moment.

"Why not?"

"Leave it alone," Tyler warns her.

"No, he needs to say it. Why won't it work? You need to deal with this. You've always been in love with her and if you would just—"

I smack my hand against the table. "Because I'm not my dad, dammit. I'm not." If I keep saying the words, they'll be true. They have to be true.

Tyler snorts. "Keep telling yourself that."

His words hurt more than if he'd punched me. I struggle to get a breath in. *Is it possible? Am I like him, and I've just never noticed?*

Tyler tosses his whole hand into the pile and leans across the table to glare at me. "You're a runner. Same as dad."

My jaw aches from the pressure I'm putting on it. "I've never left you. Any of you. When you got the flu, I was the one who drove you to the hospital. When Finn streaked through the football field, I was the one who bailed him out. When Lexie was in that car accident last month, I was the one who handled it. I've *always* been there."

How can he not see that? How can he not understand that everything I've ever done has been for them, for all of them?

"Nobody's debating that," Finn's voice is quiet. "You were good to us. But we're all grown now and you're still running from her."

His words register, creating a sick feeling in my gut. "Is that what I'm doing?"

Tyler clears his throat. "Maybe you're not leaving June with a mortgage and three little boys, but yeah, Josh, you're running from her."

All this time I thought I was protecting June by avoiding our friendship, by avoiding her. But she was right with what she said to me in the cabin. "I am a coward."

"Time to man up," Lexie says. "What are you going to do?"

An idea forms in my head, a way to win June back. "I could use some help."

\*\*\*

## *June*

Every time my heart beats, the jagged pieces scrape against my chest. Every breath makes me ache.

I don't know why I had to talk to Josh, why I felt the need to tell him I loved him. I should have kept the knowledge to myself and returned to Seattle. I'd still ache for him but at least, I wouldn't have the memory of his rejection.

I'll never understand how he could throw away something so beautiful. But Josh does this. Every time I get close, he backs away from me.

Just like with that kiss in his truck when I was sixteen. Just like in the bathroom. He always looks at me so tenderly. But then he walks away, and I have to pick up the pieces of my broken heart.

At least the day is coming to an end. I can slip into my bed and sob for a few hours. May is still in the main lodge and if I'm lucky, she'll stay there late as she works on the wedding preparations.

I open the cabin door and gasp at the explosion of yellow. Sunflowers are in vases on the dresser, the floor, and the bookshelf. There are even sunflower petals scattered all over the beds. Standing in the middle of all the sunflowers is Josh.

"Please, don't," I whisper the words.

He steps closer to me and reaches for my face. But before he can touch me, he drops his hand.

"Why do you always hurt me?" I'm crying and I'm angry that I'm crying. "Why do I have to care so much more than you? Why do you always leave me every time I reach for you?"

"Because I didn't want you to wake up one day and hate having settled for me." He shakes his head. "You and me, we're different than my parents and it took me a while to realize that. But I know it now and if you'll give me another chance, I promise I'll never break your heart again."

I want to believe him but then I think about his words in the bathroom. "It's OK, Josh. You don't have to pretend sex with me meant anything."

"It meant everything to me." When Josh reaches for me this time, he cups my face in his hand. "You were my first. I waited for you for years. I haven't been good at saying the words, but I'm in love with you, my sunflower. You are my forever, the only woman I've ever wanted."

I lean into his touch and relax my body against him. I've waited years to hear those words from him. Those precious words. I take a deep breath and whisper, "You're my forever too."

He makes a relieved noise. "I'll never run from you. Not ever again. Whatever happens from this moment, I'll be by your side."

"I like the idea of Josh and June together forever," I tell him, feeling the hope bloom in my heart.

Then Josh kisses me. Like really kisses me with all of the passion and longing he's been keeping inside, and I realize that sometimes, your best friend can become your best forever.



# Epilogue

## *Josh*

I grin as I walk into the beauty supply store here in Sweetgrass River. The overhead bell rings, announcing my arrival.

My beautiful wife looks up from the counter where she's chatting with two little old ladies about the benefits of her latest product.

It's been three years since I made this woman mine and two years since I slipped a ring on her finger in front of our family and friends.

I approach the counter and steal a quick kiss from June, amazed that I could have ever run from us. If it hadn't been for my siblings talking sense into me, I'd probably still be here alone and pining for her.

Mrs. Carson chuckles. "Oh, dear. It's closing time, isn't it?"

"I'm afraid so," June answers, her cheeks heating with a pink blush. It's the same shade her face turns when I'm down on my knees with my face buried between her pretty thighs.

I turn to the playpen behind the counter, picking up our adorable one year old daughter. There's a playpen in my office too. For those days when June is traveling on business and Annie stays with me.

We've found a way to make it work, so June never has to give up her dreams or compromise her goals. I don't ever want to be the one clipping her wings.

My little girl with blonde hair the same shade as her mama's lunges for me. I scoop her into my arms, pressing kisses to her belly because they never fail to dissolve her into giggles.

June finishes with her customers and switches the sign for her shop to closed. Her beauty store attracts plenty of

attention from people who travel miles to meet her after watching her beauty channel online. But it's also popular with the locals who adore her.

"Are you ready to leave?" I ask when I realize June's been staring at me and Annie with a dreamy smile playing on her lips.

While I drive the truck back to our place, June doesn't keep up her usual steady stream of chatter. But Annie does. She shrieks in baby babble the entire time. I think she's going to be another chatterbox, just like her mama and I love that idea.

When we get back home, I handle dinner while June feeds Annie. Then she bathes her and puts her down in the nursery.

By the time that our little one is settled, I've got dinner on the table. I pause to light a few candles and adjust the lighting.

"This smells good," June tells me when she comes in the kitchen. She wraps her arms around me. "I missed you today."

I got called in at four this morning while June and Annie were still sleeping. My day was so hectic that I didn't get a chance to see them until I went to the beauty shop tonight. "I missed you too."

We eat dinner in near silence which is strange. Normally, June has a hundred things to share with me when we haven't seen each other all day.

Even when I wash the dishes and she dries them, she doesn't say much. She just stares at me with that dreamy expression again.

"It always worries me when you go quiet," I tell her later when we're in the bathroom together getting ready for bed. She's dressed in this tiny white slip that makes me want to drag her into our bed right now.

I reach for her ponytail and free her hair. I brush out the tangles, watching her expression in the mirror.

She closes her eyes and hums as I touch her head. She doesn't look troubled. "I'm just thinking."

"About?" I finally prompt when I'm done with her hair.

She opens her eyes, and her gaze finds mine in the mirror. "About all the ways we're growing."

I relax. "Do you have new ideas for your shop?"

The last time she expanded, my brothers and I handled the construction work. It took time and effort to coordinate but it was worth it to see the look of delight on June's face when it was finished.

She chuckles and takes my hand, pressing it to her stomach. "No, our little family is growing."

Joy bubbles up as I get what she's saying. "Are you pregnant again?"

She nods. "I took a test this morning. What do you think about having a strong little boy who looks just like his daddy?"

I was nervous when June was pregnant the first time and worried I wouldn't know what to do with a daughter. I raised my brothers and Lexie. But she was such a tomboy that it felt more like raising three boys.

It turns out though I really like having a daughter, especially one that enjoys tea parties and sparkly pink things. "I want another little girl who looks just like her pretty mama."

"That's a really good answer." She presses kisses to my jaw.

It's not long before I'm pulling her into the bedroom and sticking my head up the white nightgown of hers, showing her again and again just how much her man loves her.

Later, she nestles her head onto my chest. "We'll need to think about names."

We spent June's first pregnancy debating names.

Then on the day she was born, I took one look at our precious little one and said her name had to be Anna. It

means beautiful. Besides her mama, she was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

"If it's a girl, how about Joy?" I suggest. "Our family fills me with joy. Seems like a fitting thing."

"I like it." June threads her fingers through mine and yawns.

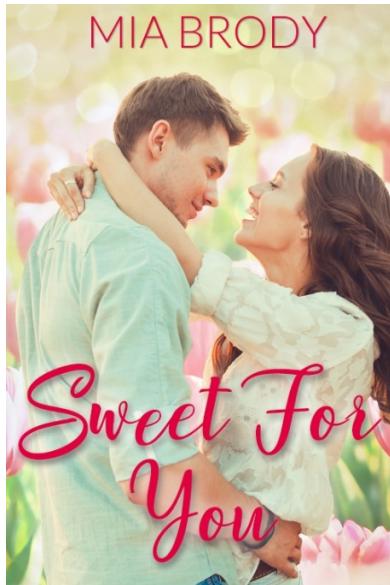
"Then I'll have Sunflower, Anna, and Joy. My three blessings." I give her a grin and press another kiss to her forehead.

I don't know what I did to get so lucky, but I know one thing. I'm never letting go of my beautiful family.

\*\*\*



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# About the Author

Mia Brody writes steamy stories about alpha men who fall in love with big, beautiful women. She loves happy endings and every couple she writes will get one!

When she's not writing, Mia is searching for the perfect slice of cheesecake and watching way too many K-dramas.

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